Part IV

AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Glenn Ligon, "Untitled: I Do Not Always Feel Colored," (ca. 1991)

Chapter Eleven

Outside the Circle: African-American Art and the African Heritage

Berrisford W. Boothe

> The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience.
>
> —Wessily Kandinsky, *Concerning The Spiritual in Art*

The following portfolio of images is, at best, a sample of the impressive and culturally relevant flow of images generated by African-American artists. It was in many ways an arduous task to select a critically representative body of work. In the end I did what artists do; I allowed the resonance of certain images to act as the operative variable. There are many other images and art objects that showcase the vibrant energy of the African spirit in America. The ones selected and presented here have a direct association with my own transplanted identity as an African American. For example, in Aaron Douglas' *Negro Life* it is the radiating sacred power of the body as instrument in the act of dance. Palmer Hayden's John Henry illustrates the tangible desire of the oppressed for the redemptive power of myth and John Biggers' *Shotguns* orchestrates so well the cultural overlaps between myth, order, religion, female power and the socio-political black reality of America.

The art of African America has a long and distinctive history. Forcible transplanting of millions of Africans to America assured the introduction of varied African spiritual and aesthetic philosophies in the complex mixture that is American art and life.

It is true that every culture produces an art of its own which is born of experience. At its best, art extracts from and reflects culture. In the case of African-American art, the dominant, still-evolving culture of Western art became a source from which to borrow, deconstruct and conjure new images of identity and self. The obstacles for African-American artists trying to examine and reflect their inner soul, their cultural identity in both the larger context of the American mainstream, have been numerous. To further complicate things, for many years the accepted measure of talent and worth was the ability to ape existing European movements or styles.

The art of Africans in America at once recognized and transcended this facile premise. For the American artist of African ancestry, the paintings, quilts, ironwork, sculptures and other artifacts spoke directly to the American experience; one in which the Negro is both feared and necessary. In many ways, the art of Africans in America was the first legitimate American art. We find the art of synthesis — the covert sampling of what is available to create what is necessary, often with a codified voice. In some cases, Eldzier Corter's *Southern Gate,* for example, the work functions as corrective history

depicting a side of the black cultural milieu absent from the psyche of most white Americans — the distinct beauty and personality of the African-American woman. Elizabeth Catlett Mora's poignant image *Target* is rich beyond its metaphorical combining of elements. For many African Americans, the cross hairs of this society are fixed squarely at the temple of our being. In the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Obnoxious Liberals* and Glen Nigon, *I Do Not Always Feel Colored,* there is an uncensored outpouring of collective emotion. Basquait, with his raw, unedited application of color and scrawled test, defies anyone to soften the message. In a culture where all messages are mediated, he screams at the viewer with uncomfortable clarity. Similarly contemporary artist Ligon uses the structure of familiar text and layers his message like some kind of never ending run-on statement, or in some cases affirmation, of his/our inconvenient displacement in America. David Hammons' *Flying Carpet* with its whimsical affixing of fried chicken as an ornamental motif celebrates and underlines the inventiveness of African Americans.

We have always had to graft and at times subvert the prevailing American aesthetic and infuse it with mechanisms that ensure the survival of our collective identity. To that end, self deprecating humor has always proven invaluable.

Contemporary African-American artists like David Hammons, Adrian Piper, Renee Stout, Glenn Ligon and Willie Cole have declared autonomy from popular definitions of "black art by choosing to give voice to the observations, beliefs, aesthetics and cultural attitudes that have remained acceptably neutral far too long." They are among a growing number of African-American artists who no longer find it necessary to require authorization or acceptance from the dominant culture to speak the truth about their experience. The new authority in African-American art is the authority of the legitimate cultural self. The objective is the continued injection of a rich cultural past both spiritual and ritual, directly to the body of post-modern American art and society.

Artists and Works

1. **Edmonia Lewis**, *Forever Free*, 1867. Marble. Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
2. **Henry Ossawa Tanner**, *The Thankful Poor,* 1894. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Dusable Museum of African-American History.
3. **Aaron Douglas**, *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting,* 1934. Oil on canvas. 72 x 78 1/2 inches. Art and Artifacts Division. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
4. **William H. Johnson**, *Mount Calvary,* ca. 1944. Oil on paperboard. 27 3/4 x 33 3/8 inches. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of the Harmon Foundation.
5. **Hale Woodruff**, *Mutiny Aboard the Amistad,* 1938-1939. Oil on canvas. 10 feet, 34 inches x 5 feet, 11 inches. Slavery Library, Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama.
6. **Jacob Lawrence**, *The Ordeal of Alice*, 1963. Egg tempera on hardboard. 19 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist and the Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
7. **Hughie Lee-Smith**, *Temptation,* 1991. Oil on canvas. 48 x 36 inches. ©Hughie Lee-Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York. Photo: Courtesy of the June Kelly Gallery.
8. **Elizabeth Catlett Mora**, *Target,* 1970. Bronze. 34 cm. ©Elizabeth Catlett. Licensed by AGA, New York, New York. Photo: Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center.
9. **James Hampton**, *The Throne of The Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly,* 1950-1964. Gold and silver aluminum foil, colored Kraft paper and plastic sheets over wood, paperboard and glass. 180 pieces in overall configuration: 10 1/2 x 27 x 14 1/2 feet. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Anonymous Donors.
10. **Palmer Hayden**, *His Hammer in His Hand,* 1944-54. Oil on canvas. By permission of the Estate of Miriam Hayden. Courtesy: Museum of African-American Art, Los Angeles, California.
11. **James VanDerZee**, *Portrait of a Couple*, 1932. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of Donna VanDerZee.
12. **John Biggers**, *Shotguns,* 1987. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 47 3/4 x 55 3/4 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.
13. **Jean-Michel Basquiat**, *Obnoxious Liberals.* Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 68 x 102 inches. ©1982 Estate of Jean-Michael Basquiat. Used by permission. Courtesy: The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection.
14. **Pat Ward Williams**, *Accused, Padlock, Blowtorch,* 1987. Magazine page, silver prints, film positive, windowframe, tarpaper, text. 64 x 72 inches. The Whitney Museum of American Art Collection. Courtesy of PPOW, New York.
15. **Charles White**, *Sound of Silence,* 1978. Lithograph. 24 1/2 x 34 inches. Courtesy of the Heritage Gallery, Los Angeles, California.
16. **Tom Miller**, *And the Livin' is Easy*, 1989. Enamel on wood and acrylic on nylon. 66 1/2 x 60 x 48 inches. Private Collection. Courtesy of the Steven Scott Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.
17. **Adrian Piper**, *Vanilla Nightmares #8*, 1986. Charcoal on newspaper. 14 x 22 inches. Richard Sandor Collection. Courtesy of the artist.
18. **David Hammons**, *Flying Carpet,* 1990. Persian Rug, wire, fried chicken. 113 x 185 x 4 inches. Courtesy of the Jack Tilton Gallery.
19. **Glenn Ligon**, *Untitled (I do Not Always Feel Colored…)* 1990. Oil on stick and gesso on wood. 80 x 30 inches. Photo: Dennis Cowley. Courtesy of the Max Protech Gallery.


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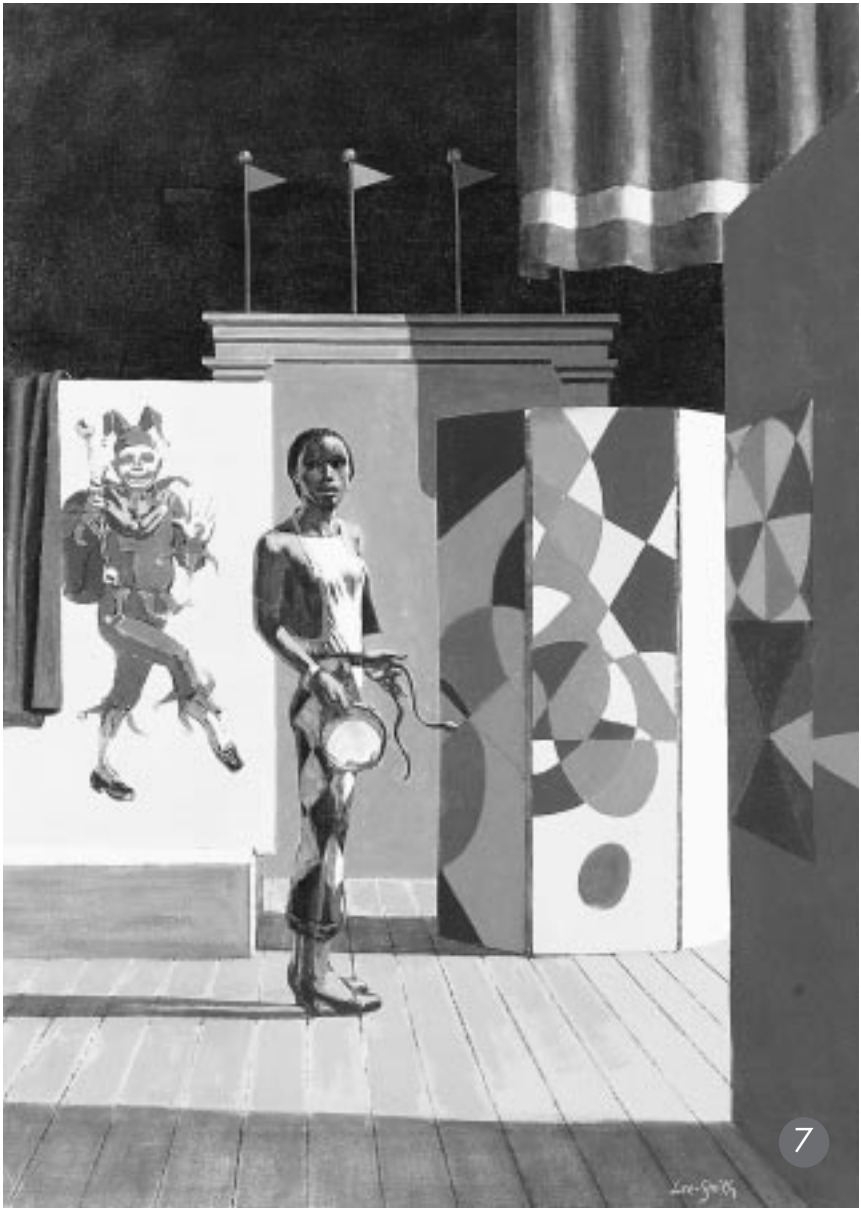
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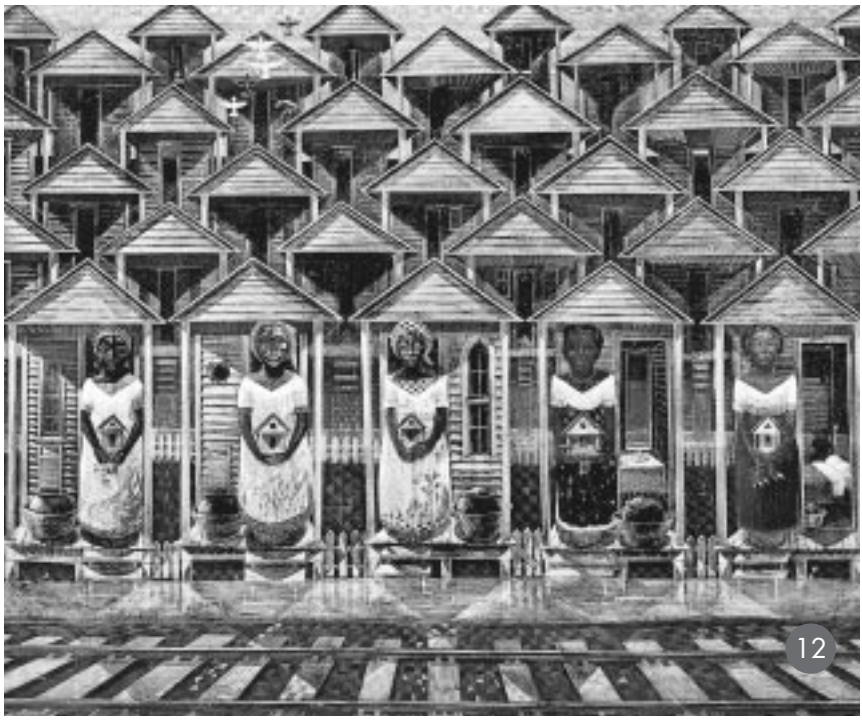

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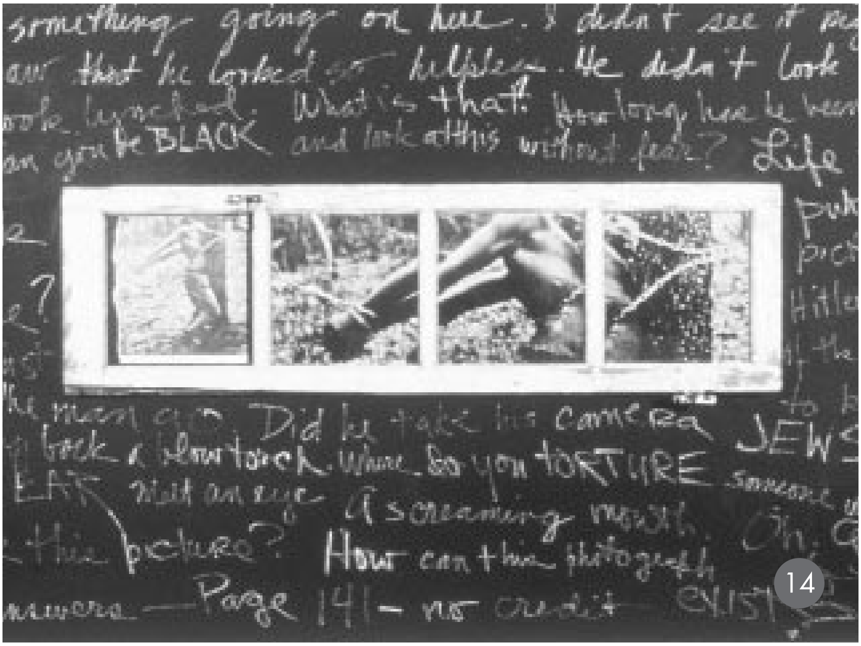
something going on here. I didn't see it
that he looked so helpless. He didn't look
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can you be BLACK and look at this without fear? Life
Did he take his camera
back a blowtorch. Where do you TORTURE
JEWS
with an eye A screaming mouth.
this picture? How can this photograph
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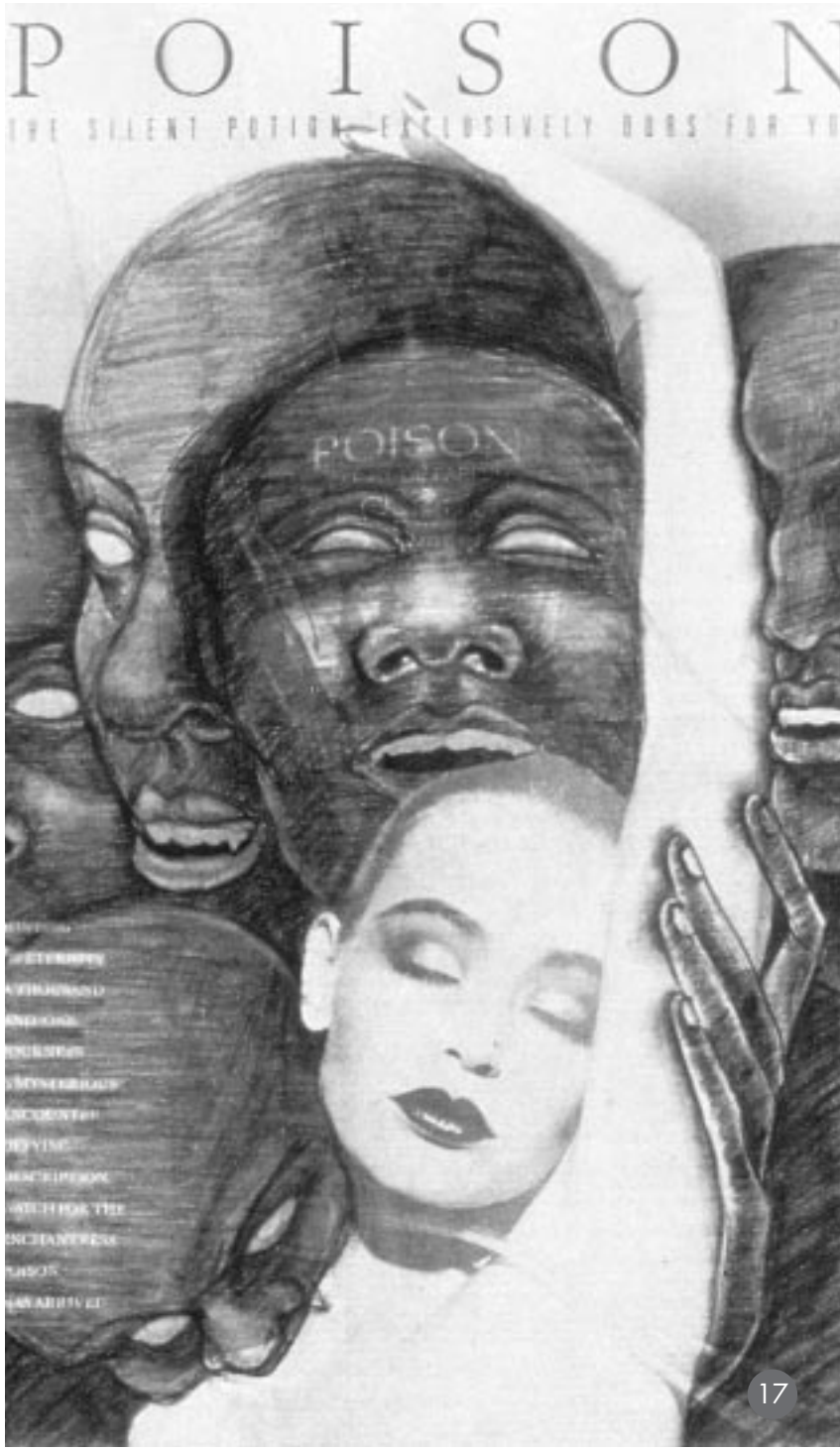
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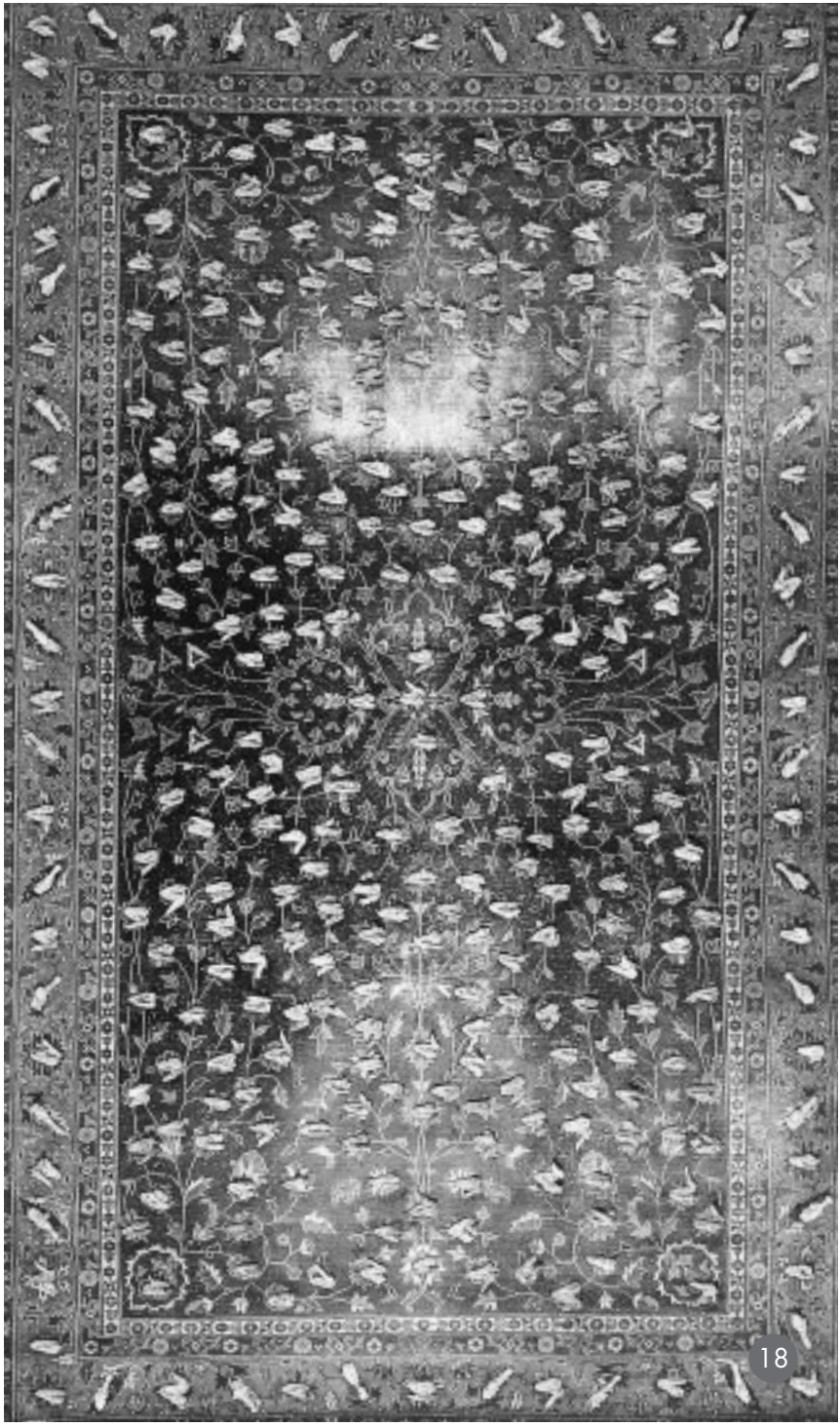
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I DO NOT ALWAYS FEEL COLORED. I DO NOT
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Chapter Twelve

The Sounds of Blackness: African-American Music

Waldo F. Martin

Deeply influential musics have clearly distinguished the cultures of Africans in the Americas from the initial days of New World African enslavement. The centrality of music in African-American cultures is particularly evident in 17th- and 18th-century colonial North America and the United States from the late 18th century to the present. While the impact of African music on New World cultures outside the United States is an extremely important development, it is beyond the scope of this discussion. Here the focus will be the development of African-American music in what comes to be the United States. Equally important, the emphasis will be African-American music as a window onto the making and the meaning of both American culture and African-American culture.

Throughout the African sojourn in the Americas, music has been a critical cultural practice and belief. In addition to bringing their musics with them, enslaved Africans continued to envision and to make music as they had in their various African societies; music-making remained an interwoven philosophical and physical experience. These musics thus operated in a unified intellectual and emotional world where mind and body were inseparable. In that world, the sacred and the secular were likewise understood as a whole. An essential element of the enduring power of New World African music has been its integration of function and meaning.

Notwithstanding significant similarities of form and content, continental and diasporan African musics reflect significant differences. The latter demonstrate the intercultural interactions in the Americas among African, European, and indigenous New World peoples. These dynamic processes of cross-cultural contact and influence can be seen within and across the changing cultures of the interacting peoples. It must be stressed that the New World results of these patterns of intercultural influence must be seen in important ways as different from the traditional, pre-contact cultures. In other words, non-African influences, especially European and Native American ones, helped to shape the divergences between African cultures and New World African cultures.

Principally because of intercultural impact, then, over time these African-American cultures — like New World European and indigenous cultures — become blended. As shown by the historical experience of Africans in the 13 colonies and the United States, prolonged and intense periods of cross-cultural interchange often yield hybrid or composite cultures. The processes of cultural borrowing and mixing go in innumerable directions. This would include cross-cultural influences among different African groups (or among different European groups) as well as such influences among Africans and Europeans.

Indeed a critical element of the fashioning of New World African cultures is the ongoing tradition of cross-cultural sharing and meshing among Africans themselves. It must be reiterated that these mixed African-American cultures in crucial ways are unlike the primary or parent cultures from which they derive. This distinctiveness can perhaps best be represented by thinking of what happens to Africans and Europeans in the Americas as Americanization.

The complicated process of Americanization, or becoming American, can be understood in many ways. Culturally speaking, for African Americans music has been a critical medium for the creation and elaboration of a sense of identity as American as well as African American. The inextricably bound historical identities of being at once both African American and American define and complicate the culture, notably the music. Attracted by the beauty of the American ideal while at the same time repelled by the racism of the American reality, Africans have sought to realize the former by ceaselessly struggling to undermine the latter. The music vividly captures this powerful dialectic at the center of the continuing African-American liberation struggle.

The African influence in the United States can thus be illustrated in part by looking at the Americanization of Africans in the New World. This same influence can also be viewed by looking at the Africanization of the Americas. The strength of this latter angle of vision is twofold: its emphasis on African agency; and, its historically-grounded analysis of the powerful African impact on the cultural mapping of the Americas. African-American music illuminates, on one hand, the cultural interpenetration of Africa, Europe, and the New World. On the other hand, and even more crucial for our purposes here, the social history of African-American music sheds much-needed light on the related African cultural penetration of the United States.

The following analysis will not only illustrate the mutual impact of Africanization and Americanization upon each other. In addition, this discussion will emphasize this interpenetration of America and Africa principally from the African perspective. The guiding argument is that American culture (hereafter used to refer to the culture of the United States) possesses an intrinsic Africanness within its creole complexity. This Africanness, put another way, is a principle defining quality of American culture as well as African-American culture.

When contrasted with its African roots, African music in the North American colonies and subsequently the United States reveals significant continuities and shifts. As argued previously, the differences between continental and diasporan African musics can be traced primarily to the critical changes indigenous African musics undergo in the New World. The nature of several of these changes have been noted previously yet warrant further explanation. First, as slaves coming from different African societies, African Americans created musics which resulted in part from the melding of diverse African influences. That is to say, notwithstanding the dominance of certain African musical cultures in specific areas — say, the Bakongo among the Gullah in coastal South Carolina — African-American music also reflected the melding of various African musics. An important consequence of this merging of African musics was the pushing forward of similarities as well as the resolution of differences in the development of African-American musics.

Second, as the slaves of European Americans, African Americans developed musics in ways growing out of the influence of learning aspects of the various European musics they encountered. Third, as key agents in processes of cultural exchange in America among Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans, the latter also encountered Native American musics in certain areas. Scholars have traced these influences in vocal and instrumental musical traditions. Not surprisingly, however, while extant, the evidence of cross-cultural musical influence among Native Americans and Africans is rare compared to that of like influence among European Americans and African Americans. As a result, the focus here will be the latter.

Notwithstanding the differences among the interacting African musics in addition to the differences among the interacting Native American, European, and African musics, several developments gave emerging African-American musics unusual resiliency and power. First, where similarities existed among the different traditions — as in certain vocalizing and drum techniques, and the key role of music and dance in rituals and ceremonies — African musical traditions found reinforcement, even enrichment. Second, the traditional African musical openness to outside influences and emphasis on innovation enabled African Americans to incorporate into their own musical practices innumerable outside ones. In effect, they reinterpreted these practices — like the playing of the violin, or the singing of hymns — within their own musical style and repertoire making these practices their own. Third, the ubiquitous presence of music within African-American cultures likewise enhanced the music's resiliency and power.

In fact, these emphases upon improvisation, inclusiveness, innovation, and flexibility are vital to a cluster of interrelated elements contributing to the music's enduring vitality and impact.These and other qualities constitute a series of interlocking fundamentals uniting continental and diasporan African musics. At the center of this pan-African musical consciousness is rhythmic complexity and a corresponding hypnotic feel. This complicated musical heartbeat — encompassing polyrhythms and cross rhythms — propels and unifies the various elements. Besides the above defining elements, others include: call-and-response, or antiphony (back-and-forth exchanges between groups/individuals within the music-making event; a social, or collective, format; functionality; an intimate tie to dance and bodily movement — a crucial part of its performance feature; and, an emotive, even ecstatic, temper. In varying combinations, these markers make African and African-American musics distinctive. In spite of their differences, these musics must be seen as parts of a unified tradition.

The development of New World African musics must be understood to originate in the West and West Central African cultures from which the bulk of the slaves came. The sites of capture and transfer to the slave ships for the forced passage to the New World witnessed outcries of loss, separation, grief, and mourning. The shrieks, groans, moans, and songs were in part strategies of survival and adjustment. Various descriptions of these haunting vocal messages noted their musicality as well as their insight into the captives' thoughts and feelings. These plaintive stirrings often found the captives seeking solace from their traditional gods and ancestors and speaking to their captors — pleading with, cursing, and condemning them.

More important for this discussion, these "songs" disclosed the intergroup and intragroup communication among captured Africans vital to an incipient pan-African identity. Furthermore, the musical sounds accompanying the horror of capture and enslavement laid the basis for a cultural memory rooted in resistance, struggle, and hope amid "unspeakable" oppression. That memory found musical remembrance in many ways, perhaps most tellingly in the 19th-century crucible of the spirituals and the turn-of-the-century crucible of the blues.

During the dreaded Middle Passage (the hellish slave voyage to the Americas), the practice aboard slave ships of forced merry-making among the enslaved — "dancing the Negroes" — offers similar evidence of an early site of African-American music-making. Serving as entertainment for the slavers (who often got in the act) as well as exercise/recreation for the slaves, it also served as a space for the initial reworkings of African dance and music often in concert with European influences. As one might expect, the outcries mentioned above continued on the ships. Over the course of the slave trade, on the African coast, on the slave ships, and in the Americas, spoken communication and musical wails often reflected pidgin languages (combining African languages with European terms and elements). These creolized languages and the corresponding creolized musics clearly influenced each other. Nevertheless, these musics and languages — like the cultures of which they were a part — remained fundamentally African, reinforcing the growth of a pan-African sense of identity among the enslaved.

Once in the Americas, music remained a revealing expression of the elaboration of a distinctive African-American culture and identity. During the 18th century when the bulk of the African slaves were imported, the constant infusion of African cultural influences revitalized the music's Africanness. In the 19th century with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and the subsequent expansion of the domestic slave trade, memory, tradition, and the continuing practices of music-making enlivened the Africanness of this most vital African-American cultural framework. In rural and urban settings, North and South, African-American music during slavery (1619-1865) revealed an overarching ethos and an increasingly singular sense of pan-African consciousness, in spite of the differences among African Americans. This world view and identity reflected common critical elements derived from the African background. A sacred understanding of the cosmos, a cyclical time perspective, and orality buttressed this ethos and consciousness.

These fundamental emphases found expression in African-American musical aesthetics, notably rhythm. Where melody anchored European music, rhythm anchored African music. Consequently, rhythm, particularly the drum, provided a common musical syntax and grammar: a common cultural style. The drum enabled African Americans to evoke and thus to communicate with the ancestral spirits, to delineate musical time, to punctuate cultural events, to provide a foundation for song and dance, and to communicate as with words. Indeed the notion of "talking drums," or "drum language," signified the wide-ranging communicative abilities of skillful players and listeners. Drums then could be played melodically and rhythmically, permitting multiple uses and complex statements.

The power of the drum and its percussive corollaries united and sustained African Americans politically as well as culturally. Early examples of its power could be found throughout the colonies in references to slave unrest as well as slave social life. The drum served to draw together African Americans in ways which promoted instances of individual resistance, such as absconding to freedom, and collective resistance, such as uprisings. Increasingly aware of the drum's subversive capacity, especially in the 18th century, European Americans throughout the colonies officially banned African-style drumming. Typically on the surface this ban appeared effective. In fact it pushed the practice underground. The rhythmic engine of the music resurfaced in the increased use of (1) other percussion instruments; (2) of non-percussion instruments percussively; and, (3) of the voice and the body itself as percussion instruments.

Interestingly enough, African Americans, slave and free, played drums along with trumpets and fifes in militia bands. The approved style was European — simple and straightforward. If the drum was in many ways the most powerful of the African instruments to come to North America, the banjo was among the most popular. Accounts of fine banjo playing by African Americans are not hard to find. Similarly, clear evidence exists of African Americans playing a variety of other African instruments, including horns, small flutes, thumb pianos, bells, rattles, and pipes. African Americans also became exceedingly proficient on a variety of European instruments, including flutes, horns, and violins. African Americans evinced what observers often characterized as unique techniques or approaches: a distinctive African-derived style.

African Americans, free and slave, as well as European Americans, especially slave masters, appreciated African-American musical virtuosity. Within the black and white communities considerable status and prestige resulted from the demonstration of musical talent. These musicians, slave and free, often had special privileges, such as extra provisions and greater mobility for slaves and pay for free blacks. Whereas African Americans found particularly appealing those African-American musicians skilled in African-style music, European Americans favored those skilled in European-style music. Many musicians performed in social gatherings, formal and informal, among both whites and blacks. The experience of music-making in both African and European styles enhanced the cross-fertilization of both styles and expanded the musicians' repertoires.

African-American stylistic distinctiveness was evident in vocal as well as instrumental music. The song style of African Americans was highly expressive: more percussive than lyrical. Examples abound of the resounding singing of African Americans among themselves. Like examples point to the overpowering singing of African Americans drowning out European Americans when both groups sang together in religious as well as secular settings. In addition to strong volume and emotional intensity, African-American song style blended the vocal and the physical. The former included shouts, falsetto, trills, and slurs; the latter included foot stomping, hand clapping, body weaving, and head bobbing. This song style(like the corresponding instrumental style) reflected a fundamental rhythmic thrust, or percussive mode. It also reflected the intimate tie of the music to bodily motion and dance, of music-making to performance.

Indeed African dance has had an indelible impact on American dance. African-derived sensibilities and movements have dominated the history of American social dance. Like the music of which it is an integral part, dance was a vital social practice binding the group together and projecting a collective sense of identity. Also like the music, dance reflected fundamental cultural ideals: rhythm, flexibility, innovation, spontaneity. The movements themselves reflected a physicality, an earthiness, a comfortableness with the body, a sense of style — of cool. Specific features included dragging and gliding steps, pelvic action, impersonations(notably of animals), little actual contact between dancers, and gestures — subtle, vigorous, and smooth. Broadly speaking, European dances tended toward the more formal and rigid, African dances toward the more open and expressive. It should be noted that cross-fertilization notwithstanding, in the development of both African-American dance and music African styles and movements proved determinative.

The significance of the dance-music nexus was evident in sacred as well as secular contexts. This dance-music pivot was a central aspect of ritual celebrations and ceremonies, ranging from funerals to corn shucking parties. The Christmas-New Year season was an important holiday space for parties and celebrations showcasing music and dance. Likewise, there were regional antebellum celebrations such as Election Day and Pinkster Day in New England, the John Canoe festival in eastern North Carolina, and Sunday celebrations in New Orleans' Place Congo structured around the dance-music dynamic.

Throughout those areas with a more pronounced African presence, such as the South Carolina-Georgia Sea Islands, the music and the dance-like the culture generally — vividly reflected that presence. This was especially the case with ritualized celebrations. Funerals often included libations, grave decorations, and animal sacrifices, evidencing the traditional African emphasis on veneration of the ancestors and a holistic world view uniting the spirit and physical worlds. The music and the dance ranged from the somber and the reverential to the joyful and the ecstatic. Similarly, secular moments like corn-shucking parties found African Americans singing and dancing, often quite vigorously, as an expression of sociality as well as conviviality. Even with whites present and under the influence of Christianity, African modes of celebration persisted. Funerals as well as corn-shucking parties, then, were highly expressive social events both binding the community together and reflecting a collective sensibility.

A very important dance driving the culture's fundamentally sacred ethos was the African-derived ring shout: a counter-clockwise circle propelled by the spirit, going from a slow-motion shuffle to a more rapid rhythmic series of steps. Religious worship services, informal and formal, as well as sacred ceremonies like funerals might feature variations of this kind of holy dancing. At least since the 19th century, the history of African-American dance — sacred and secular — has reflected the influence of the ring shout and its various permutations. The interpenetration between the sacred and secular realms has been notably evident in the mutual transference of steps, gestures, and motions. Often the salient distinction between religious and secular dance has been that in the former one does not cross one's feet.

A related manifestation of the structural significance of the ring shout has been the powerful interlocking singing which concurrently helped to drive the ritual momentum. Indeed the ring shout has been a vital crucible wherein countless reworkings of religious tunes evolved spontaneously. In these kinds of intensely charged ritual moments of ecstatic dancing and singing, elements of various religious songs and messages were transformed into African-American sacred music, most notably the spiritual.

Emblematic of the sacred world view of the slave, the spirituals clearly represent a creole form with deep African roots. Marrying sacred African-American musical practices with Christian musical tradition, the spiritual flowered in the 19th century as the Christianization of African Americans proceeded apace. Building upon African Americans' religious understandings, the texts of the spirituals — including Biblical stories, psalms, and hymns — emphasize optimism, affirmation, and deliverance. This extraordinary sacred music — like much of African-American music — has helped African Americans to transcend their earthly oppression, if only momentarily. This psychic relief has contributed to the spiritual reservoirs that African Americans have found it necessary to construct and to draw upon. Their mental health and growth as a people have demanded the strategies of endurance and self-affirmation which the spirituals epitomize.

An intensely moving body of music, the spirituals speak to the life and death issues dealt with in sacred music generally. The profundity of the spirituals derives in significant measure from the dialectic between African Americans' search for secular freedom and their deep-seated religious faith. Indeed, this dialectic between liberation struggle and religious commitment shows their interconnectedness; historically, they have informed one another. They have also buttressed a sense of peoplehood, community, or nationality among African Americans. Otherwise stated, the intertwined impulses of freedom and religiosity in the spirituals demonstrate an increasingly sturdy and collective sense of African-American identity.

An important aspect of the world of the spirituals was the personalization of the ties between biblical figures and African Americans. These fictive ties were affective: "My God," "King Jesus," "Sweet Jesus," "Sister Mary," "Brother Daniel." Similarly, in the spirituals African Americans likened themselves to the Chosen People, the Jews of Israel, whose destiny it was to overcome persecution and deracination. God had brought the Jews out of bondage and he would do the same for African Americans. Secular as well as spiritual freedom, then, was understood to be a consequence of Christian faith. Resistance to oppression and wrong found support in the emancipationist vision of Christianity in the spirituals. "Steal Away to Jesus" was thus a signal for untold numbers of slaves to make the break and run to freedom.

In light of the holistic world view of antebellum African Americans, especially slaves, it is not surprising that their secular music-making was quite similar to their religious music-making in style and power. Social occasions such as impromptu and planned parties and various seasonal ceremonies (like those marking the end of planting and harvesting seasons), called forth music-making as an essential element of the merry-making. Lyrically this music ranged from the political and the satirical language critical of the subordination of African Americans, slaves especially, to the ordinary and frivolous. The famous ex-slave Frederick Douglass recalled a striking example of the former from his memories of slavery. One of the lines observed: "We bake de bread, Dey gib us de crust." Clearly these more subversive lyrics were most likely to be found in those situations where blacks were less constrained by white surveillance.

Almost any occasion, even work, could be made more tolerable, even enjoyable, with the right musical accompaniment. Work songs, consequently, were particularly prominent in the secular music repertoire. Song could be heard during housework, field work, industrial work, and work on the wharves and waterways. Those African Americans laboring on the lakes, rivers, and oceans as well as the ports not only developed engaging tunes dealing with their

lives. They were also a vital conduit for the migration of musical influences. This is evident in the movement and cross-fertilization of black musics up and down the Mississippi River.

Music could also be heard on street corners, in late-evening or weekend slave gatherings, in the privacy of African-American homes. This music ranged from the secular to the sacred, instrumental and vocal. Certain public forms of secular musical expression were notable for their effectiveness at combining work with song. Street cries were used by itinerant salespersons to draw attention to their wares. Water calls were an effective means of communication on the waterways. Spirited field hollers were observed throughout the plantation South. The distinctive and catchy African-American vocalizing traditions represented by field hollers, water calls, and street cries struck many an ear. These kinds of work music combined with increasingly solo musics evident in African-American social gatherings to herald a counterpoint to the collectivist ethos so crucial to traditional music-making.

Emancipation in the crucible of Civil War altered the historical landscape and gave African-American music-making new directions. With freedom came increased opportunities for African Americans to make music openly and publicly. Venues for music-making proliferated, from the juke joints of the rural South to the elegant theaters of the cities. The institutionalization of Jim Crow concurrent with the ascendant racism at the turn of the century reflected the official marginalization of African-American culture, even African-American music. Institutionalized racism notwithstanding, African-American music like the culture of which it was so integral a part, flowered.

This efflorescence was especially noteworthy in the elaboration of post-emancipation musics, or genres, growing out of the African-American quest to give meaning to life under freedom. As such, the music continued to illustrate black efforts to define themselves as both a distinctive people and as Americans. A historical analysis of the most important developments in 20th century African-American music — blues, gospel, jazz, and related varieties of post-World War II African-American popular music-illuminates the ongoing African-American struggle for empowerment and self-definition. In addition, as New World 20th-century forms, these hybrid yet fundamentally African musics demonstrate the synergism of the cross-fertilization among both themselves and with other musics.

While blues, gospel, and jazz are the major developments treated here, reference will be made to other salient developments. In the 1950s popular black music became known as rhythm and blues: an increasingly urban, rhythmically-dense, yet hybrid blues-driven music. The concurrent development of Rock and Roll signified in large measure a marketing strategy for Jim Crow America: rhythm and blues — played in Euro-American-inflected styles and Afro-American-inflected styles — aimed at mainstream white audiences. Regardless, rock and roll greatly increased the exposure, appreciation, and acceptance of African-American music.

Even more important for the growing recognition and popularity of African-American music was the pervasive impact of the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement(1955-1975). The ever-increasing visibility of African Americans and the growing white acceptance of the legitimacy of African-American claims for both full-fledged citizenship and full participation in the American dream spilled over into enhanced appreciation for African American history and culture. African-American music has benefitted greatly from this expanded valorization. Within this context, Sixties Soul music married the secular intensity of the blues to the sacred intensity of a gospel backdrop and found enormous popularity.

The Seventies saw the emergence of funk and disco: further elaborations of rhythmic texture. Funk is more blues- and performance-based: grittier and rhythmically more complex; disco is more pop- and studio-based: smoother and rhythmically more simple. Most recently, a variety of dance musics have drawn heavily upon these styles, including house and Jamaican-inflected dance hall. The most influential recent development has been rap: a form marrying verbal fluency with musical tidbits sampled largely from various African-American musics.

This kind of creativity has earmarked the rich African-American musical tradition, especially the bedrock genres of blues, gospel, and, jazz.

These genres had their immediate origins in the post-emancipation period and the desire of free and emancipated blacks to substantiate their apparent gains. For untold numbers of ex-slaves especially, the ability to move from place to place signified freedom. Over time that commitment to migration in search of freedom would transform the African-American experience and, in turn, African-American music. In the late 19th century, African Americans were overwhelmingly southern and rural. By 1970 they lived mostly in cities outside the South. Similarly, African-American music has gone from pockets of local, regional, and national notoriety in the late 19th century to dominance of the world music market in the late 20th.

This extraordinary movement of African-American cultural capital around the globe could not have been foreseen at the turn of the century. That African Americans themselves typically have not controlled the commercialization of their musics has meant that the fortunes made off of the musics have most often gone into other hands. This disheartening reality mirrors the racism and discrimination which have historically bedeviled blacks. With the white supremacist counterrevolution in the aftermath of the illusory gains of the Civil War and Reconstruction years, black economic development was stymied. Rather than an examination of that process, however, or more pointedly the commodification and exploitation of African-American musics over the last century, the rest of this essay goes in a different direction. It examines what it is about those musics that have given them such lasting power and ultimately their international stature.

Part of the answer resides in the fundamental humanism of African-American music: its ability to speak to basic human goals and desires; its willingness to grapple with the complexity of the human condition. Nowhere is this clearer than in the blues. The origins of the blues date back to the turn of the century and demonstrate the increasing personalization of musical expression, on one hand, and the increasing emphasis on solo artistry, on the other. This growth of the individual voice personifies the postemancipation evolution of the "New Negro:" each succeeding generation's quest to arrive at a more satisfactory representation of African-American identity and purpose. In addition, it represents an insightful African-American perspective on the modern existential condition.

A folk music, the blues has most effectively turned inward and explored the internal workings of African-American life. This deep probing of the complexities of lived experience enhances the music's resonance. Dedicated to a thorough-going examination of the thin line between such dichotomies as joy and pain, love and hate, lust and affection, triumph and failure, the blues scrupulously dissects human psychology and emotions. The music has proven notably incisive in its explorations of the interrelated worlds of gender politics and sexual politics. Issues of pleasure and desire animate the music. The stereotype of the blues as sad is wrongheaded. Sadness is simply one emotion within the wide-ranging emotional palette of the blues.

Like the spirituals, the blues are a music of hope and affirmation building upon diverse African-dominated roots. Also like the spiritual, the blues are a bedrock genre upon which subsequent African-American musics have drawn. The secular roots of the blues are traceable to minstrel, vaudeville, and ragtime tunes as well as ballads and work music. Religious roots include the spirituals themselves, hymns, and early gospel music. As musicians commonly played sacred and secular music, the blues profited enormously from the cross-pollination with sacred musics, and vice versa. Often characterized as the "devil's music" by those who objected to its unabashed celebration of the pleasures and desires of the flesh, the blues nonetheless prospered in large part because of this sensual and sexual fixation.

This leads to another factor contributing to the increasing popularity of African-American music: its intensive exploration of not just the profound similarities between the

Street Musician and Friend. San Francisco, October, 1983. (© Roger Ressmeyer/CORBIS)

sacred and the secular but also the inherent ties between them. Over the course of the 20th century African-American music paradoxically has reinforced and undermined the sacred/secular boundary. Playing within the exceedingly fertile terrain of the sacred/secular border has yielded often mesmerizing results and uncommon cultural power.

Gospel and soul music are prime examples. The sacred music impact, notably that of gospel, is evident among exemplars of the 1960s soul music tradition — Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and Etta James. Similarly, the secular music impact, notably that of the blues, is evident among exemplars of the gospel tradition — Thomas Dorsey, Rosetta Tharpe, and Mahalia Jackson. These kinds of multiple, cross-cutting, and highly creative influences have energized, often revitalized, all areas of African-American music, including jazz. Since 1945, especially within jazz, there has been effective borrowing from a broad range of musics, including Brazilian, Caribbean, East Asian, European, and African. This trend has obviously enhanced the music's scope and international appeal.

The universal appeal of the blues, however, resides primarily in its ability to render the complicated and the messy of the human condition both meaningful and understandable. It is ultimately a celebration of the human spirit. Because the blues have developed in settings dedicated to entertainment and pleasure, they are aptly seen as a "good time" music. An essential component of that "good time" is the highly evocative quality of a solid blues performance. Indeed the emphasis on skilled musical performance has contributed mightily to the influence of African-American music, not just the blues. Charismatic performers — from blues diva Bessie Smith, rock giant Jimi Hendrix, to the 1990s mega-star formerly called Prince — have created fans for their music as well as their star personas. Being able to captivate an audience — "bring the house down" — with a spine-tingling performance typically sets the stars above the rest.

The format of the blues is deceptively simple: a 12-bar form, 3-line stanzas, the second line a repetition of the first. Within this uncomplicated structure, the range of vocal and instrumental variations and styles have been impressive. Vocally, the blues have relied heavily upon its folk roots. A favorite blues approach has been the recreation of emotion through the use of falling pitches. Likewise, voices ranging from the smooth to the rough have employed an

impressive number of vocal gestures including cries, bends, moans, dips, and grunts. The use of falsetto and vibrato has been noteworthy as well. Instrumentally, blues musicians often accompanied themselves with guitars, banjos, pianos, and harmonicas. As blues musicians have grown in vocal and instrumental dexterity, so have blues performances.

Roughly speaking, there are three widely recognized blues styles: down-home (country), classic women's blues of the 1920s, '30s(and beyond); and urban blues. Needless to say, these divisions often function better as categorical devices instead of analytic ones. While influential down-home blues styles incubated throughout the early 20th-century South, the most influential developed in the Mississippi Delta. The most important of these Delta bluesmen was the elusive Robert Johnson who died violently in 1938. His slender recorded output belies his enormous impact. Provocative songs like his "Sweet Home Chicago" and "Hellhound on my Trail" attest to a restless, rootless spirit seeking but never quite discovering fulfillment. In addition to a fundamental grittiness and lyrical bite, his music featured a strong delivery, quick bottleneck runs on the guitar, finely wrought yet earthy vocals. His work has influenced the bluesman Muddy Waters, folk singer Taj Mahal, rock guitarist Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones rock group.

"Ma" Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, and Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, exemplified a dazzling blues tradition which achieved considerable commercial success in the '20s and '30s. In various forms this tradition has tremendously enlivened the whole of African-American music as well as the music of black women vocalists. The huge 1920 hit recording of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" contributed to a two-pronged craze for the music of blueswomen and blues music in general. "Ma" Rainey's work went in a folk direction while that of Bessie Smith went in a jazz direction. Both had powerhouse voices, vigorous deliveries, and commanding performance styles. These blues divas worked in a grand tradition including the likes of Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Memphis Minnie.

This potent music reflects the gendered roots of the blues and black music generally. Most important, the music of black blueswomen has been an important creative outlet for a compelling expression of black women's concerns and perspectives. At its finest, this music has been about the intricacies and insights of "truth talking." In the post-World War II period, with wonderful effects this tradition has spilled over into other genres and been influenced by them. The 1950s rhythm and blues explosion witnessed the revitalization of this tradition with the work of such artists as Big MaMa Thornton, Ruth Brown, and LaVern Baker. Soul music divas Etta James, Nina Simone, and Aretha Franklin likewise revivified the blueswoman tradition joining it with gospel roots, creating an ever more expansive cultural space for the likes of post-Soul divas Chaka Khan and Whitney Houston. Not to be neglected is the work of those like dynamic Chicago blueswoman KoKo Taylor. For several decades now, she has presented authentic urban blues from a black woman's point of view.

Black bluesmen likewise had a profound impact on black popular music. They, too, spoke with authority and insight about life from an experiential perspective. Pushed by southern poverty and Jim Crow and pulled by the lure of better jobs and opportunities, especially during World Wars I and II, the migration of huge numbers of blacks to large northern cities, especially Chicago, deeply affected black popular music. The music increasingly spoke to the black urban experience. Rural blues adapted to urban rhythms and sensibilities. The music of Mississippi Delta bluesmen Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, and John Lee Hooker vividly captures the post-World War II urbanization of the country blues. The music swang and rocked faster and harder. This was perhaps best represented not just in the growth of rhythm and blues offshoots, but also in the revitalizing urban energy represented by the growing use of amplified instruments among blues musicians. The stunning electric guitar work of 1940s blues legend T-Bone Walker captivated audiences and influenced the likes of B.B. King who continues to personify the extremely influential tradition of electric guitar-based blues.

If blues can be seen as "secular spirituals," then gospel can be seen as "spiritual blues" (or, "spiritual seculars"). A performance-based music like blues, gospel also seeks an incandescent emotional peak. Gospel, however, relies far more heavily upon the traditional group-based ethos so central to the collective and spontaneous African-American music-making style. The antiphonal cross-currents, therefore, are far stronger, as these encompass call-and-response among musicians — singers and instrumentalists — as well as the musicians and the audience. Gospel arose as a turn-of-the-century sacred music response to one of freedom's dilemmas: evidence of spiritual declension, notably since emancipation. To recapture that fervent emotionalism of yesteryear, gospel updated the spirituals and the stock of traditional religious music with an injection of ardent evangelism.

This music sank its strongest roots initially in the fundamentalist churches. As southern rural blacks came increasingly to cities, gospel took on an urban gloss. Unwritten texts gave way to written texts; the holy fire had to accommodate over time to the strictures of Black Baptists and Methodists. Critical to the growing popularity of gospel were the efforts of composers like Charles A. Tindley who early in this century wrote down many gospel songs. Similarly, in the 1930s the efforts of Thomas A. Dorsey — clearly a father of modern gospel — along with those of gospel singers like Sallie Martin and the incomparable Mahalia Jackson were crucial to the growing popularity of the music. They traveled the country bringing the gospel music news and made innumerable converts, even at times winning over those who saw the music as too bluesy and too jazzy.

In fact, the increasingly popular "gospel blues" style of Dorsey and his growing legion of supporters provided potent shots of secular musical influences, particularly rhythms, beats, and song structures. For much of the 1920s Dorsey himself had been a blues pianist and composer of considerable achievement, having worked with "Ma" Rainey and Tampa Red. As with other forms of African American music, this cross-fertilization of gospel — in this case with blues influences — immeasurably enhanced its power and appeal. Furthermore, this blurring of the sacred/secular music border reveals a persistent tension within African American music between "traditionalists" favoring a tighter boundary and "progressives" favoring a more permeable one. Especially since the 1960s, as African-American secular music styles, like soul, have benefitted tremendously from the creative borrowing of rhythm and blues from gospel, in turn gospel progressives have continually revivified their music through creative borrowings from secular genres, like soul.

The desired effect of a gospel performance remains to work the audience into a spiritual frenzy as a way to strengthen religious commitment, or better still, to bring souls to religion. This tradition of "church wrecking" or "house wrecking" persists and illustrates the dramatic intensity of an incandescent musical/ritual experience. The best groups and soloists compete to outshine the others in their "church wrecking" ability. The idea is to make the performers and audience one in the service of God. The music is a critical element of a multilevel process including preaching, praying, testifying, and a broad range of physical responses from foot stomping and moaning to shouting and speaking in tongues. The vocal and instrumental music build up to a spiritual peak, sustain it, and then gear it up to higher levels until the spirit has been satisfied. The experience can be overpowering.

Singing preachers, notably those who specialize in the "performed" sermon, are especially effective at propelling this ritual forward. Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha's father, was a master. The singing itself is often awesome in its intensity. The vocal repertoire is vast: runs across octaves, note bending, playing with notes and words/phrases, effortlessly taking syllables/words over several notes (melisma), shouts, grunts, whispers, moans, cries, lyrical flourishes and full-throated ones. For maximum effect, highly dramatic vignettes, often employing gripping narratives such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, accompany the singing. This spiritual ecstasy has clear analogues in the kind of secular ecstasy the best blues perfor-

mance aspires to. Therein lies a crucial element of the transgressive power and universal appeal of African-American music; its creative blurring of the secular/sacred border.

Jazz owes much of its popular appeal to its fruitful working of this same terrain. A most powerful modern urban musical response to the challenges of freedom, principally in cosmopolitan cities like New Orleans, jazz evolved out of an African-American amalgam of various influences. The roots of this exceedingly hybrid musical form include brass band music, syncopated dance music, dance orchestra music, blues, minstrel/vaudeville tunes, ragtime, and sacred music. The key to jazz is its emphasis on improvisation. In an important sense, this music epitomizes the performance basis of African-American music. Through improvisation, jazz endeavors to recreate itself not merely with each formal/musicological advance of the music, but also with each performance as well. This is indeed a most difficult challenge.

Twenties jazz featured various formats, orchestras and small groups among them. The major innovator of this period was trumpeter Louis Armstrong who emerged from his early days in New Orleans and then Chicago to revolutionize American music. Two of his signal contributions were his technical brilliance and his development of a stunningly distinctive style as a soloist, especially in the context of group performance. In addition, he was a first-rate entertainer, and from the 1930s until his death in 1971 a major American celebrity. His most influential music is that from the late '20s and early '30s where his melodic and rhythmic innovations heralded a fusion of passion and technique in the service of improvisation From that point on, jazz has never been the same.

Armstrong of course had influences, notably trumpeters Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, and King Oliver. What set Armstrong apart, however, was his astonishing and individualized sound. Particularly striking were his tonal range, his octave-leaping runs, his ability to reinvent a melody, his sure-handed rhythmic sense, his feel for the blues, and his ability to swing. These are all basic to the jazz vocabulary. In addition, Armstrong's assertion of a pathbreaking musical voice — like that of blueswomen "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith — epitomized the "New Negro" of the '20s Harlem Renaissance. Although barely glimpsed at the time, Armstrong's signature voice personified that audacious cultural quest for a new, vibrant, and uniquely African-American artistic identity far more vividly than the vast majority of the literary and visual artists most often associated with the movement.

As Armstrong blazed the frontier of solo jazz performance, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington blazed the frontiers of jazz orchestra and jazz composition. Building upon the innovations of contemporaries like pianist-composer Jelly Roll Morton and band leaders Fletcher Henderson, and Don Redman, by the early 1930s Ellington had created an exceptional band with a remarkable repertoire. His many achievements included successfully resolving the problems of balancing the often competing demands of improvisation and composition. Likewise, through a rigorous understanding of his band's group strengths as well as its outstanding solo voices, he fashioned music blending these ensemble and individual talents. The music of Ellington is often lauded for its wide-ranging scope, textures, colors,and beauty. Another aspect of his music's greatness is its successful merger of often quite different forms, notably elite and vernacular ones. An excellent pianist, he was an extraordinary band leader and an even more impressive composer, with over 1,500 works to his credit. These include film scores, operas, extended concert works, as well as the popular tunes like "Sophisticated Lady" for which he is so well-known.

Innovators like Armstrong and Ellington pushed the music forward as did popularizers, especially white bandleaders like Paul Whiteman and exceptional white instrumentalists and band leaders like clarinetist Benny Goodman. In fact, the 1930s swing music craze fed the growth of many first-rate black territory bands, most notably Count Basie's hard-driving outfit out of Kansas City which went on to international acclaim. Swing offered Depression America a pleasurable respite amidst the gloom.

Since the forties and fifties dominated by the development of bebop and the 1960s dominated by the development of free jazz, the music has witnessed significant efforts to update various jazz traditions and to expand them. African-American music since the 1940s has been deeply influenced by the growing political assertiveness of the black liberation insurgency. This expanding commitment to both black self-definition and black consciousness found resonance among exemplars of bebop and free jazz and has continued to influence jazz developments. An important consequence of these recent permutations of the recurrent phenomenon of the "New Negro" has been the growing demand that jazz and jazz musicians be accorded the respect and accolades at home that they receive abroad. In the 1990s jazz's growing popularity as well as its increasing recognition by major national cultural institutions, like the Smithsonian and America's principal concert halls, appear to augur well for the music's future.

With the decline of swing and swing bands in the forties, the future for many in jazz was not as hopeful. Bebop reignited the music with its renewed emphasis on improvisational acuity, harmonic and melodic inventiveness, and the ability to play brilliantly at breakneck speed. While the work of many — including trumpeter "Dizzy" Gillespie, pianist "Bud" Powell, and drummers Kenny Clarke and Max Roach — contributed to the music's evolution, the awe-inspiring work of alto saxophonist Charlie Parker exemplified the challenging world of bebop. Not only did he play music of uncommon mastery and beauty, but he also lived on the edge. Consequently, he influenced countless musicians and artists who admired his risk-taking iconoclasm.

Likewise, the development of free jazz involved innovators of the first order. Of particular note is the highly influential work of saxophonists John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. Their best work exemplifies free jazz: the quest for full improvisational freedom within the context of collective music-making. Coltrane's mesmerizing and dense aural explorations made him immensely popular, especially among those engaged in issues of black cultural aesthetics.That over time his playing took on probing spiritual qualities only added to the aura of his music. These spiritual elements are reminiscent of the emotional intensity of gospel music at its peak. Coleman's pathbreaking work resolves beautifully the problems of playing freely yet coherently outside the received strictures of chord changes, rhythms, and harmony. Like the innovations of Ellington and other great jazz composers operating more squarely within traditional limits, however, Coleman's have inspired those seeking to play jazz seamlessly as solo and ensemble, on one hand, and composition and innovation, on the other.

Black women in jazz have achieved their greatest acclaim as vocalists. Indeed the tradition of jazz vocals has spawned a stellar array of talents. As within other musical genres, jazz vocalists apply their masterful touch to songs from various genres, including pop and blues. Interpretive ability, emotional depth, and stylistic uniqueness set the best apart. From the gripping poignancy of Billie Holiday to the awe-inspiring technical aplomb of Sarah Vaughn, this music has immeasurably enriched American culture. Equally important, like black women vocalists whose work operated within and across various genres — such as Dinah Washington, who could apparently sing anything well — these exceptional artists carved out a vital creative niche for others like them.

In the late 20th-century, two tendencies propel the continuing growth and vitality of African-American music. First, as evident in the work of influential jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the African-American musical tradition is sufficiently rich and complex to sustain both contemporary revisions as well as repertorial interpretations. Second, the richness and complexity of this diverse tradition reveals a powerful dynamism. In effect, the ongoing processes of revision and renewal constitute fertile grounds spawning exciting and significant new forms The most arresting and influential development of the last two decades has to be rap music, itself a diverse and changing music. As a union of various African-American oral traditions with the latest music-making technology, rap has revitalized earlier black musics,

especially the soul and funk innovations of artists like James Brown, through its ability to sample virtually unlimited bits and pieces of those musics. Similarly, through its emphasis on powerfully spoken/chanted lyrics, it revitalizes black traditions of verbal virtuosity such as toasting, signifying, and storytelling. Also important is its telling commentary on late 20th-century America, especially the state of America's black inner cities. Such extraordinary cultural commentary and inventiveness clearly augurs well for the future of African-American music.

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Chapter Thirteen

Black Voices: Themes in African-American Literature

Gerald Early

In his assessment of African-American literature, published as one of the four essays in his 1957 book, *White Man, Listen!,* Richard Wright says, "The Negro is America's metaphor." By this he meant not only that blacks were the symbolic embodiment of the history of America in the sense of being an outcast people trying to find a new identity in the New World but also that they were, through the circumstances of being forced to live in a country "whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were leveled against them," constant reminders of the anguish of being without an identity, constant reminders of human alienation. According to Ralph Ellison, Wright's good friend back in the 1930s, "The white American has charged the Negro American with being without a past or tradition (something which strikes the white man with a nameless horror), just as he himself has been so charged by European and American critics with a nostalgia for the stability once typical of European cultures."

But Wright saw in the African-American's quest for an identity, in his struggle against human alienation, against being a symbol of the abyss of estrangement, a deep political and philosophical resonance that, in fact, gave America both an aesthetic — blues music — and crucial forms of social engagement that blacks, and the political culture of the United States itself, used as forms of dissent against the idea of human alienation: first, abolition, then, Reconstruction, and, finally, the civil rights movement. "Is it not clear to you that the American Negro is the only group in our nation that consistently and passionately raises the question of freedom?" asks Wright. "This is a service to America and to the world. More than this: The voice of the American Negro is rapidly becoming the most representative voice of America and of oppressed people anywhere in the world today." In effect, Wright is suggesting that black Americans, within the framework of their isolation, had managed to create community and common cause with other victimized peoples in the world (particularly the "colored" world, a very important designation, as Wright wrote his essay just a few years after attending the first Afro-Asian conference which took place in Bandung, Indonesia, and which first articulated the "non-aligned" position — neither pro-Western nor pro-Communist — of the countries of the Third World). Also, Wright suggests that black Americans were to construct a penetrating view of the general human condition through the prism of their own localized experience.

Because the quests for a usable community and for identity have shaped black experience itself in America, Wright argues his essay, these quests ultimately inform African-American literature. When one thinks of the earliest black writer in America to produce an estimable body of work, poet Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784), this observation certainly seems true, not simply about black people generally but about the black writer especially. Wheatley,

born in Senegal, and brought to America at the age of eight, had to learn both a new language, and a new religion, indeed, an entirely new way of life, the same cultural disruption and brutally imposed cognitive dissonance that other Africans experienced as well, except that in some manner, as a child, the adaptation had to be, paradoxically, both easier and harder. Yet she so completely absorbed aspects of her new culture that she was able to write poetry in the leading literary style of the day by the time she was a teenager. Naturally, because of her age, some of her poetry exhibits facility but lacks depth. But the question of identity, while muted in most of her work, still appears here and there, and one must suppose that she thought a great deal about her precarious fate as a favored slave and about the nature of the black community that she was not fully a part of for a good portion of her life in America and which was powerless to support her as a writer. In any case, she never forgot that she was an African. It was hardly likely that she forgot that passage or the circumstances that brought her over to the New World. For instance, she wrote these lines in the poem, "To the Right Honorable William, Early of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, Etc.":

> Should you, my lord, while you pursue my song,
> Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood,
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was the soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

In these lines, there is not only a sense of being taken away from the life and culture and from parents who felt concern and cared for their child, (concerns seldom attributed to Africans by whites at the time), but also a sense of justice born from having endured the experience of a disrupted community. Wheatley, who died poverty-stricken, abandoned by both the black and white communities, in some ways both voiced and personified the themes of identity and community that were to be fully developed and elaborated upon by later black writers.

"The radical solitude of human life," wrote Jose Ortega y Gasset in his 1957 philosophical treatise, Man and People, "the being of man, does not, then, consist in there really being nothing except himself. Quite the contrary — there is nothing less than the universe, with all that it contains. There is, then, an infinity of things but — there it is! — amid them Man in his radical reality is alone — alone *with* them" (Ortega y Gasset's emphasis). Somehow, this seems to capture Wheatley herself, mastering foreign cultural tools for a self-expression that was never quite her own, a sly and complicated ventriloquism that was both the triumph and the tragedy of her assimilation. By redefining her theft from Africa as a providential plot for placing her in a more transcendent community, she might ultimately find closure for her predicament. Thus, she writes, in "On Being Brought From Africa to America,"

> 'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

In 18th century New England, with the rise of liberalism, Calvinism was forced to retreat before a more humanitarian world view, before the view that, despite their condition, babies, "idiots," blacks, and others "naturally perverse in their will toward sin" ought not be consigned to hell. This view obviously affected Wheatley in two ways: first, as a product of the new liberalism where her poetry would be appreciated and encouraged as a sign of God's deliverance of the benighted; and second, as a believer in the new liberalism as a way to explain her fate and the form of cultural assimilation that she was experiencing. More importantly, the idea that blacks could be or had to be, in one way or another, "refin'd" or uplifted as a cure for their alienation or degradation, has been a constant in African-American thought, from the earliest writings in English to the ideas of nationalists like Marcus Garvey (whose organization was called the Universal Negro Improvement Association) and Malcolm X. Perhaps one way in which Richard Wright was truly path-breaking was in his reluctance to think in those terms.

Struck deeply by the alienation described by Ortega y Gasset was Richard Wright, one of the major African-American writers of the 20th century, a figure so monumental that the era from the late-Depression when Wright began publishing through 1960, the year of his death, is often referred to as his epoch. Wright was heavily influenced by Marxism, a philosophy he learned during his days as a Communist writer and editor in Chicago and New York in the early and mid-thirties, and by existentialism. A philosophy he felt intuitively from his youth when it provided a substitute for the Christianity that he abhorred, Wright read deeply about existentialism after World War II, existentialism's heyday. In his major works before his self-imposed exile from America after the Second World War, it was not that Wright introduced new themes to African-American writing. Instead, he concentrated, as had others before him, on the quests for identity and for usable community. However, partly because Wright was born and reared, for the most part, in Mississippi, the most backward and brutal state in the Union on the matter of race, no black writer before him achieved either Wright's visceral intensity in describing black-white relations or displayed as deep a passion for seeking broad philosophical implications in black American life. And no black writer before him saw black life in such stark, often cosmically lonely terms. Finally, no black writer until Wright had become as famous, as accepted in this country, and particularly abroad, as a genuine man of letters and a writer of unquestioned stature. The works for which Wright became known — *Uncle Tom's Children* (1937), a collection of novellas set in the south, *Native Son* (1940), his grand urban novel of crime and punishment set in Chicago, and *Black Boy* (1945), his autobiographical exploration of black adolescence in the American south — emphasize a deep sense of estrangement in characters unable to connect with a larger aggregate of humanity, characters trying heroically to establish their identities but confounded by incredible forces that manipulate and annihilate their sense of place and belonging, by forces that transform anxiety into impotent rage and turn fear into inexhaustible dread. The stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, all about black rebellion against the violent white power structure, move from heroes who are unconscious of any political significance in their acts, largely buffeted by the tides and whimsies of a cruel, indifferent world, trying desperately to extricate themselves from a seemingly inescapable fate, to more politically aware heroes (the heroine of the last story is a Marxist as well as a deep believer in black solidarity) whose revolts are self-consciously motivated. But even in the most restricted circumstances, Wright gives his black characters choices. Wright was never to abandon his Marxist/existentialist belief that man makes his world, makes his circumstances, and makes his fate. In *Native Son*, considered by most critics Wright's master-

piece, the reader is given the most vehement critique against the idea of welfare-state liberalism ever written by a black to this time. In this ideologically driven novel, Wright presents welfare-state liberalism, which for the rich, white Dalton family of the novel, represents a mere mask for exploitative power and for maintaining the status quo of keeping black families like Bigger Thomas's poor and huddled in ghettos. Bigger's psychotic attempt at liberation is doomed to failure because he has accepted the terms of his blackness that white society has imposed upon him. In other words, he has sought his humanity by becoming the very inhuman thing that white society said he was and, in effect, made him. In *Black Boy,* by looking in an exaggerated and not entirely factual way at his family and rearing in the South, Wright explores exclusively the idea of what black community means. It was in this book that Wright made one of his striking, and, for some, disturbing, statements about the meaning of black community:

> After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.
>
> Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.

Wright had two aims in writing this passage: first, despite his own love of sociology, he wanted to lift the level of discourse about the black condition from mere sociology to something philosophical, to something which spoke of the problem of human community. Second, hoping to reverse, harshly and shockingly, a tendency he disliked in earlier black writing, particularly in some of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance, he wanted to de-romanticize and de-exoticize black life.

But to understand fully how an author like Wright shaped his work, it is necessary to go back to the slave narrative, the earliest form of black American writing that formed a coherent body of work, that expressed a plain ideological task and purpose and set forth the themes of identity and community that were to characterize all the black writing that came after. As mentioned earlier, poet Phillis Wheatley's work exhibited these themes, almost as a subtext, but the ante-bellum slave narratives sharpened and strengthened these concerns by making the black writer a presence in American life and letters.

One of the antecedents of the ante-bellum slave narrative was the Indian captivity narrative of the 18th century, usually a tale about a white captured and forced to live for some period of time among Indians. Other captivity narratives tell tales of persons surprisingly impressed in the Navy or unfairly or unfortunately seized by the nation's enemy. The earliest black narratives such as *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man,* published in 1760, and *A Narrative of the Life of John Marrant of New York, in North America: With An Account of the Conversion of the King of the Cherokees and his Daughter,* published in 1785, were precisely in the captivity narrative

mode. They were not protests against slavery. Indeed, slavery was scarcely the subject of them in any sort of political way. Built on the captivity narrative model, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1791), was the first true slave narrative in that it was a self-conscious and explicit protest against slavery. It was the first self-conscious black or African political literature in English in the western world.

Although there were important black publications of a political or polemical sort published earlier, works such as *A Narrative of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* (1794) by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones and David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles; *Together with A Preamble, To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, To Those of the United States of America* (1829), the development and enrichment of black literature occurred in the ante-bellum period of 1830 to 1860. From small tracts and pamphlets to major, polished autobiographies, literally hundreds of slave narratives were published. Sponsored largely by white abolitionist societies in the North, as antislavery had become a major political and social movement in the United States, much of this writing suffered from same problems as early European-American literature, from an imitative or dull style and an over-wrought Christian piety. Moreover, because they were unable, without the aid of a vouching white editor or friend, to appear before the public as guarantors of their own stories, black authors were at a severe disadvantage. Finally, there was the problem of audience — whom did the slave narrator wish to address and why? Obviously, in this instance, the slave narrator desired to move white readers to act against slavery. This meant that the literature had to present the black narrator as palatable to whites who were, almost exclusively, committed to white supremacist ideals. But the black narrator, and all black writers since this period, also felt the pressure of being representative of his race and wanted to cast no undue aspersions upon it. That is to say, the slave narratives were meant both to be a protest, crossover literature for whites (to help them understand the true nature of slavery or, one might say, the black American experience) and, in some sense, a "race" literature addressing the needs of black self-esteem and racial community.

The idea or ideal of black community during ante-bellum America was a difficult one to maintain. First, the black community was a complex set of structures: there were various divisions within slavery, field hands versus house servants, artisans versus the unskilled, light-skinned versus dark-skinned, more recent African arrivals versus third-, fourth-, or fifth-generation "detainees." In addition there were the free black communities of both the north and south. Because it was the free blacks who could effectively or at least more visibly agitate for freedom, these free communities, though small, were essential to the much larger slave communities. But the free community was a complex mixture, exhibited many of the same elements that made up the slave communities, and, like the slave communities, was largely at the mercy of the whites who surrounded them. Without a centralized church, any school system worth the name, or any of the normal civic privileges that the average white citizens enjoyed, it was difficult for the free black communities to act as a vanguard for the slave communities.

Second, blacks in ante-bellum America were experiencing a complex form of cultural syncretism. It must be remembered that a number of ethnically diverse Africans were brought to the New World during the Atlantic slave trade so two simultaneous processes were taking place in the creation of black community. First, the Europeans worked assiduously to remove as many cultural props — language, religion, kinship rituals, rites of passage — that they could to make the Africans a less volatile, less war-like labor presence (which is why, in the end, the African was preferred to the Indian as a slave). Black community was always meant to be, in the eyes of whites, dependent, precarious, impoverished, an area or configuration meant to be policed and contained. Second, the Africans became to meld or distill the strands of cultural expressions that they were able to maintain to forge a new identity. So, true black community — independent, stabilized, and prosperous — was to become a subversive concept.

The most famous of the slave narratives were Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom,* Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* published in 1861, *The Narrative of William Wells Brown,* published in 1846, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* by William and Ellen Craft, published in 1860, *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown Who Escaped from Slavery in a Box Three Feet Long and Two Feet Wide; Written from a Statement of Facts by Himself,* published in 1849, *Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, Narrated by Himself,* published in 1849, *Twelve Years a Slave: the Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near Red River in Louisiana,* published in 1853. All of these works tried in various ways to create a sense of black community not only in the narratives by talking not only of the slave narrators' sense of connection to his or her own family (family piety was virtually a cliche in this works) but to the larger community of slaves, who often assisted the narrator in his escape. Moreover, the books tried to create a sense of connection through their texts between blacks north and south, slave and free. Of these, the works by Douglass, Brown, and Jacobs are considered by literary critics and African-American literary experts today to have the most value.

Indeed, both Douglass and Brown, both escaped slaves who became veteran speakers on the abolition circuit, were true men of letters. Douglass ran a newspaper for many years and Brown published several other works including a novel, *Clotel* or the *President's Daughter,* published in 1853, the earliest black novel, *Three Years in Europe,* the first black travel book, published in 1852. Brown was to publish several more books after the work including some of the earliest full-scale black histories. Other early black novels published before 1860 were Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends,* a novel about free blacks in Philadelphia, published in 1857, Martin R. Delany's *Blake: Or, the Huts of America,* a militant, highly polemical novel about black rebellion and emigration, published in 1859, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, an autobiographical novel about a biracial child's indentured servitude in a cruel white household, published in 1859. Most of these novels received little attention, at least from white audiences. Unquestionably, the most significant piece of racial fiction published during this period was written by a white woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe's epochal antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 and whose influence extended far beyond the immediate issue of slavery. The name of the title character was to become a hated epithet among blacks and the long shelf-life of the work as popular theater was to have a number of troubling stereotypes endure as near-myths in the American imagination. Novelist James Baldwin, in declaring his literary independence nearly 100 years later, was to damn, in particular, the burden of this novel on the work of black writers. He was also to damn Richard Wright who, Baldwin felt, in his own way entrapped the black writer as much as Stowe did.

But the slave narratives were, far and away, the most important and most developed black literature of the period in the United States, indeed, black literature of the western world at that time. They were to establish two major trends in African-American literature: first, a preoccupation with autobiographical and confessional writing which remains to this day; and, second, a strong tendency to bind social protest or explicit political consciousness with the aesthetic act of making literature. While the first trend has produced an extraordinarily rich vein of American writing, from Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* from *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou to James Weldon Johnson's *Along This Way,* from Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* to Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea,* the second has been far more problematical. Black literature has been charged over the years by white critics with being nothing more than social protest, or "mere sociology," or a literature without technique, style, or innovation. It was not until the 1952 publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, nearly 100 years after the publication of the first

African-American novel, that a black fictional work was considered without question to be of superior literary merit, equal to the best white literature. This slow growth of recognition and of true achievement was, in some respects, inevitable. It took nearly two hundred years for white American literature to evolve from sermons and tracts to the works of Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. But, black writers who were serious about the craft of making good literature have always been sensitive to the charge from whites of writing second-rate, race-bound works. But they have been equally sensitive to the needs of their black audience and of their group in general, understanding that African Americans would not be interested in a literature that was given over to "mere aesthetics" or to the idea of art for art's sake which most would think a frivolous indulgence, not a serious engagement with life and art as they saw those matters. Most black writers saw literature as something that represented their community, that was a force in the ideological and political construction of their community whether or not the literature actually depicted black community as a successfully working enterprise. The sense of one aspect of this problem is well captured in James Weldon Johnson's "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," published in the *American Mercury* in 1928 where he raised the issue of different audiences and the inability of the black author to reconcile their expectations, their needs, their perspectives. The reason for the severity of this problem stems in part from the nature of the black community itself and how, historically, it has been forced to function totally for the white community's convenience. The conflict about the purpose of African-American literature — for the question of its content and its craftsmanship comes down to the issue of function — in relation to the formation of community remains of great, even overriding, profundity for black writers and their audience as well as the larger society.

In the age of freedom, since the Civil War, there have been three crucial periods for African-American literature where the conflict about its purpose became explicit: The New Negro or Harlem Renaissance era, the early Civil Rights era of the 1950s, and the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s. Briefly considered, these periods coincide with certain extraordinary developments within the United States itself: Prohibition, urbanization, a false prosperity, a new wave of black political consciousness, a rising interest in and concern about Communism during the 1920s and 1930s of the Renaissance, the Cold War, prosperity, a national policy of racial integration, a new assertiveness among blacks, the rise of youth culture in the 1950s, an intense black militancy, a nation deeply divided over the Vietnam War, a rash of political assassinations, a national policy to wipe out poverty, questions about the extent and future of prosperity, and a sharply influential counter-culture on the left during the late 1960s. It is important to note two things about these three eras: each occurred during or immediately after a major American war; and, in each instance, as has been the case for African Americans in their struggle in the United States since the end of Reconstruction, the major political concerns about citizenship and community are tied, often expressly so, with the meaning and function of African-American literature, in particular, and African-American art, generally.

The era of the Harlem Renaissance, starting with the black migration to the north in 1915 and ending with the rise of Richard Wright — a southern migrant — in the late 1930s, revived the issue of African-American musical theater and African-American vernacular expression which originated in the 1890s with the famous comedy team of Williams and Walker and the period of the coon song on the one hand and the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar on the other. Indeed, James Weldon Johnson, who was such an important presence in both areas in the 1890s, was to be a prime mover and shaker during the Renaissance. African-American musical theater became very big in the 1920s as did experimentation in vernacular poetry leading, in one direction, to the blues lyrics of the young Langston Hughes, and, in another direction, to the sermonic cadences of Johnson's *God's Trombones.* In each case, old-fashioned, overly sentimentalized, and crudish eye dialect was

eschewed for something more subtle, richer, closer to the actual power and expressive range of black speech. The Renaissance brought together a number of forces: a large nationalist mass movement spearheaded by Marcus Garvey that made Africa and Pan-Africanism talked about and thought about in ways that far exceeded the intensity expressed in the 1890s black nationalist movements (of course, W.E.B. Du Bois was essential in the development of Pan Africanist thought in the United States and was to be far more important than Garvey in the development of African-American literature); two large black middle-class organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League; a revolutionary black music called jazz and, in phonograph records, a new technology to hear it; an intense historical consciousness that resulted in the formation of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and a number of anthologies on black culture including Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, the most storied of the age. It is no surprise, therefore, that this era saw the publication of Jean Toomer's experimental *Cane* (1923), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Countee Cullen's *Color* (1925), Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), to name only a small number of works by authors who were to become principal names in African-American fiction and poetry. This could only have happened because the black community itself reached a certain level of strength and self-confidence.

Nonetheless, the Renaissance was considered a failure by many black writers and critics, including a number who lived through it. First, it was felt that much of the literature seemed preoccupied with middle class concerns or with presenting blacks as exotics. This criticism was not entirely deserved, but certainly one of the burning questions of the age was "How Is the Negro to Be Depicted in Literature?" (A version of that question is still a vital concern for African Americans today.) Many white literary types thought this concern to be somewhere between philistine and infantile but they hardly understood the sensitivity of a group that had been so viciously and persistently maligned by their culture. Second, compared to the incredible experimentation going in the best white literature of the day, from Hemingway to Stein, from Joyce to T. S. Eliot, African-American literature seemed tame, indeed, almost old-fashioned in some of its Victorian flavor. Third, the black community was still weak: no major black publishing houses were produced in this era, nor were there any successful black drama companies, despite black popularity on the Broadway musical stage. Indeed, this last point may be the most telling; for unlike white ethnic enclaves like the Jewish or Irish Catholic communities in the United States, the black community was constantly seen by whites as threatening if it were not rigidly controlled and contained. Whites also used the black community as the repository for their own crimes and vices. In short, the larger white community worked very hard to make sure that the black community could never fully function as a community.

Although Wright continued to produce much important work in the 1950s including a book on the Bandung, Afro-Asian conference, a book on Ghana, a book on Spain, a collection of short stories, and three new novels, the fifties saw the end of the dominance of Richard Wright, whose works largely ended by the Harlem Renaissance by reinventing the black novel as a politically self-aware, proletariat mechanism for social criticism and engagement. In fact, it ended, at least temporally, a black interest in Marxist-oriented art and sheer naturalistic writing. In the early fifties came such writers as William Demby *(Beetlecreek)*, James Baldwin *(Go Tell It On the Mountain, Giovanni's Room)*, Ralph Ellison *(Invisible Man),* and Gwendolyn Brooks *(Annie Allen, Maud Martha)* who were to garner great critical recognition and respect from the white literary establishment. None of these novels was a purely naturalistic work and Brooks's poetry in *Annie Allen* was demanding and not in the vein of any Harlem Renaissance poet (except possibly the highly experimental Jean Toomer). Just a few years after Jackie Robinson integrated professional baseball, in an era of a more sensitive

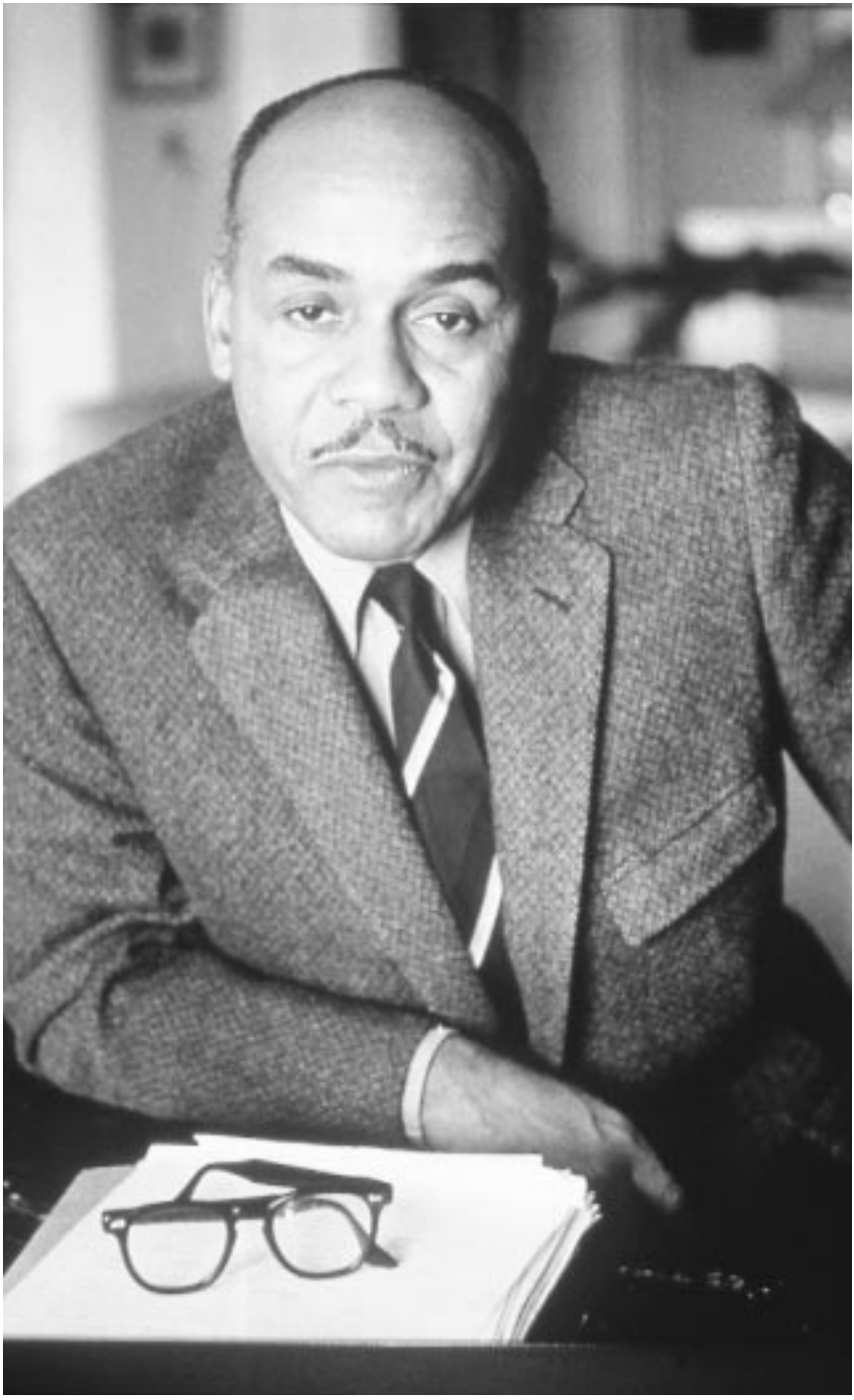
treatment of blacks in films like "Home of the Brave," "No Way Out," "Cry, The Beloved Country," and "Blackboard Jungle," and right around the time of the Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools, there was a considerable willingness on the part of the liberal white intelligentsia to accept blacks into the American mainstream, not realizing that blacks, as Ralph Ellison was to argue so eloquently in this essays, helped to invent the mainstream which had denied them for so long. These writers responded to Wright. Although much of this work still exhibited the despair, hopelessness, and violence that one found in Wright, some, like Baldwin and Ellison quite critically, muted elements of social protest by going off in new directions, writing more textured, densely complex works about the inner psychological life of black people. The end of the decade saw the rise of novelists Paule Marshall and William Melvin Kelly, poet LeRoi Jones, and playwright Lorraine Hansberry. The criticism of the literature of this period was that it was too assimilationist and far too concerned with technique, although these were, in fact, its strengths in moving black literature into the mainstream of American writing. But the movement was not quite as assimilationist as some critics thought. The black writers of the 1950s came to prominence during the liberation movements taking place in Africa and the concerted attacks against European imperialism by the Third World generally. Writers like Baldwin and Hansberry wrote about Africa as black writers have done since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Nearly all continued to attack racism vehemently. Several black writers of note found America so difficult to live in that they left the country, opting for Europe instead. The writing of this period certainly reflected not simply what the black bourgeoisie wanted but where the black community as a whole wished to go, not into a white world but away from the restrictions of a black one.

By the late 1960s, LeRoi Jones, having become a much-read poet *(The Dead Lecturer, Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note)*, playwright *(Dutchman and The Slave)*, and essayist *(Home: Social Essays)*, changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka and launched the Black Arts Movement, first in Harlem, then in Newark, New Jersey. The period lasted from 1965 to, roughly, 1975. Partly in response to the strong assimilationist tendencies of the civil rights movement, partly in response to a growing and more radical black youth movement, partly in response to black nationalism's finally having, in the figure of the recently assassinated Malcolm X, a martyr upon which to hang myths, the Black Arts Movement invented a black nationalist value system called Kawaida. Inspired, in part, by the African socialist philosophy of Julius K. Nyerere, Kawaida spawned the popular black holiday Kwanzaa and insisted that all black art had to be explicitly political, aimed at the destruction of whites or white values, and preoccupied solely with the liberation of black people. Black art had to be aimed for the masses, thus, the rise of black theater and an accessible, nearly didactic black poetry. It had to eschew white technique or an overly white, bourgeois concern with the problems of technique or formalistic meaning and process. Much of this descended into a kind of black agitprop. Yet there was impressive work accomplished at this time including the establishment of several black publishing companies — Broadside in Detroit and Third World Press in Chicago; *Black Fire,* the epochal anthology edited by Baraka and Larry Neal; work by writers like Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, and Eldridge Cleaver. It was the time of the black exploitation movies (which spawned the incredible Melvin Van Peebles's film, "Sweet, Sweetback's Badass Song"), the emergence of black radio as a true force in American culture, and the rise of boxer Muhammad Ali (who changed his name from Cassius Clay) as a black hero of resistance. Self-absorbed with its dramatic self-presentation, the Black Arts Movement produced little fiction. The most important novelist of the period was not associated with the Black Arts Movement, but John A. Williams did write the defining work of the age, *The Man Who Cried I Am.* Also, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker both began their work at this time. Once again, neither was associated with the Black Arts Movement.

Langston Hughes. (Library of Congress)

Zora Neale Hurston. (Library of Congress)

Richard Wright. (Archive Photos)



Ralph Ellison. (Bernard Gotfryd/Archive Photo)

Gwendolyn Brooks. (Bettmann/CORBIS)

James Baldwin in his New York apartment. (CORBIS/Bettman)

Toni Morrison. (© Helen Marcus)

Maya Angelou. (Reuters/Gary Hershorn/Archive Photos)

Alice Walker. (AP/Wide World)

What might be said about all of these periods is that the black community evolved or changed in some vital ways or felt itself in a state of crisis. The literature tended not simply to reflect the changes or the crisis nor just to respond to it but actually to be part of the change or crisis itself. How can writing, or literature, continue to serve the black community or help make it continue to function as community in its present condition? In each instance, innovations were produced. But also in each instance, there was less dependence on the past than there might have been, less self-conscious creation of tradition than there could have been. Perhaps in the 1920s or even in the 1950s, this was not possible. But in the 1960s, surely, one of the failures of the Black Arts Movement to become what the Harlem Renaissance wished to become — a new Irish cultural-nationalist movement, a political movement for independence through the reinvention of culture — was the inability to formulate a usable black literary past of sufficient strength and diversity to support an atmosphere of contention and challenge that would continue to generate innovation and enrichment. This is slowly but surely happening with African-American literature today, with a greater number of recognized writers than at any time in history.

It has been said that since the end of the Black Arts Movement, women have come to dominate African-American literature. Certainly, with the rise of feminism in the 1970s and a growing self-consciousness about gender on the part of black women, women's issues and concerns in African-American literature have received considerable prominence. Toni Morrison (the first black American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature), Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and even more recently, Terry McMillan and Bebe Campbell, have all become best-selling authors. Lesser known but equally well-regarded writers such as June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, Gayle Jones, and Ntozake Shange have had a considerable impact on the present literary scene. Moreover, as more women — black and white — have become university professors and literary critics, there has been a growing intellectual and scholarly interest in the work of black women. However, since the end of the Black Arts Movement, there have emerged several black male writers, many of them, such as Ernest Gaines, Ishmael Reed, James McPherson, David Bradley, Reginald McKnight, Charles Johnson, and Samuel Delany, having received a great deal of attention. Moreover, the dominant black figures in public intellectual discourse these days are men: Henry Louis Gates, Stanley Crouch, Houston Baker, Stephen Carter, Shelby Steele, Glenn Loury, and Cornell West. The belief that black women and feminist issues dominated African-American literature today has led to a distinct undercurrent of tension between black men and black women, as the former accuse the latter of unfairly attacking and criticizing them and, thus, playing into the hands of the white power structure. This has been fueled by a concern over the survival of black men in American society which some think has reached a crisis point. Once again, these developments point to the burden that black literature must carry in constructing the idea and ideal of black community and the difficulty it encounters in trying to do so because it is weighted, fraught with political and social significance. It also points to the problem of audience, since more black writers than ever are currently being recognized and rewarded by the white literary establishment, although there is a more powerful black reading audience than ever. There is, finally, the question of precisely what black literature should be about, of how much of a social protest element or sociological component it should carry, and of how black people should be depicted in it. Despite this, contemporary African-American writing is a richly diverse field and a compelling presence on the American literary scene.

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